

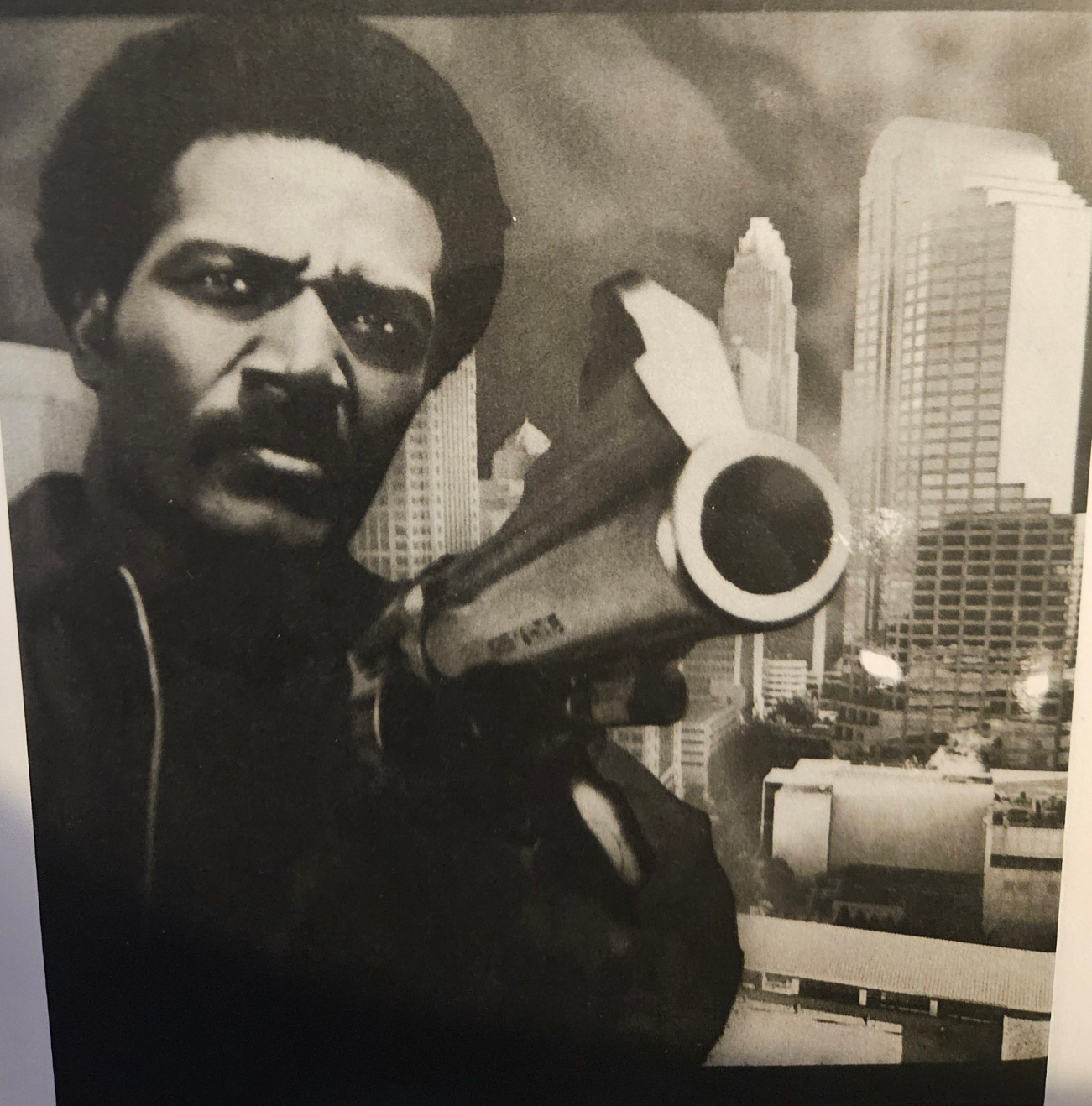
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Black Panther

ACTORS AND DIRECTORS SPEAK



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Reflections

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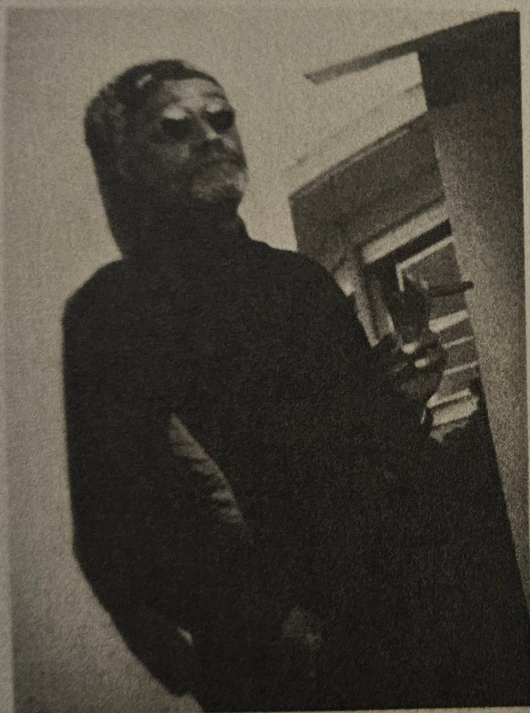
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Melvin Van Peebles



A publicity photograph of writer, director, and composer Melvin Van Peebles.

You can't have a serious discussion about the blaxploitation cycle without mentioning Melvin Van Peebles. It would be like talking about the Bible and not mentioning Jesus. Van Peebles, who has been dubbed the Godfather of Black Cinema, made his earliest short films in 1957. Van Peebles then traveled to France, where he found success as a novelist. In 1968, he directed his first feature-length film, *The Story of a Three-Day Pass*. The film, which Van Peebles made in French, garnered him accolades and awards. He then followed this achievement with his first Hollywood production, the 1970 comedy *Watermelon Man*. The film, written by Herman Raucher, told the story of a moderately racist white man who wakes up one

morning to find that he has somehow been transformed into a black man. However, it would be Van Peebles's next film, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), for which he would be remembered. The now legendary independent film was written, directed, produced, composed by, and starred Van Peebles. The film, which Van Peebles boldly dedicated to "all the Brothers and Sisters who had enough of the Man," was a major indie success and is generally considered the first blaxploitation film.

Van Peebles has since helmed a number of films, including *Don't Play Us Cheap* (1973) and *Gang in Blue* (1996), which he codirected with his son Mario Van Peebles. In addition, he has found significant success as both an actor and a musician. Van Peebles is also the author of the book *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song: A Guerilla Filmmaking Manifesto*, and is the subject of the films *Baadasssss!* (2003) and *How to Eat Your Watermelon in White Company (and Enjoy It)* (2005).

ANDREW RAUSCH: *Tell me about your path to becoming a filmmaker.*

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES: I wrote a photo essay about my having worked as a grip man on a cable car in San Francisco. I'd wanted to be a writer, and I thought I had a unique perspective regarding this particular story. So one day, a guy gets on my cable car and he's asking me questions about the essay. My real name is Melvin Van Peebles, but I think he expected it to be something like Leroy Johnson. [Laughs.] So he didn't think I had written the essay. And so he said, "Well, who set up these angles in these photographs?" And I said, "I did." And he said, "Well, who wrote the text?" I said, "I did." "Well, who did the layout?" I said, "What's layout?" He said, "That's how you lay the page out." And I said, "I did." And he was dumbfounded. He said, "It just reads right along. It's like a movie." And I thought, shit, I should make a movie. And that's how I became a filmmaker.

I found a guy who had a camera, and he said I could use it if I took him and made him the director of photography, whatever the fuck that was. So I said, "Sure, okay." And I made my first film, and I projected it up on the wall. He said, "We haven't edited yet." I said, "What's that mean?" So someone gave me Eisenstein's *Film and Form*, and that book consisted of my film education. Period. That was all I ever had.

My first "feature" turned out to only be 11 minutes long, but what the hell? [Laughs again.]

AR: *You made your first full-length film, The Story of a Three-Day Pass, in France. How did that come about?*

MVP: Well, back before they had videocassettes and DVDs, they used to have film nights in gyms and auditoriums for film fanatics in the States. And there was this guy named Amos Vogel, who's still around, and he used to take films out and show them around the country. He was a film fanatic before it became *de rigueur* to be such. And the Cinemateque in France invited him to come and screen some of his films there. And I had leased my

first few short films with him while I was on my way to Europe, where I was getting my PhD in astronomy. So Amos Vogel took these films there and screened them, and the French loved them. They then looked me up and sent me a letter in Holland. They said, "Wow, why aren't you making more films?" Well, I had gone down to Hollywood, but Hollywood was very lily white at the time. There was no chance of getting in. So I had gone back to my first love, which was celestial mechanics, which is a type of mathematics and astronomy.

So anyway, I go to France, and they were very nice to me. They screened my films, everybody kissed me, and then they drove off. And I'm standing there with two wet cheeks, three cans of film, not able to speak a single word of French, and not having a penny in my pocket. So I decided right then that I was either going to make it or die there in France. So, little by little, I learned French through immersion. Then I discovered that there was a French law that said a French writer could have a temporary director's card. So I wrote and published five novels in French and then asked for my director's card.

And there you are.

AR: *Could you tell me about the genesis of Watermelon Man?*

MVP: I was at Universal. My film *The Story of a Three-Day Pass* had won the Critic's Choice Award at the San Francisco Film Festival. I had returned to San Francisco as a French delegate. Nobody had known that I was American, let alone a black American. But I came back as a French delegate and won the festival! So from there, I was knocking around Hollywood, which was suddenly opening its doors to me. And my agent called me and said he had a script for me titled *The Night the Sun Came Out on Sleepy Hollow Lane*. He named several actors who were interested: Jack Lemmon, Alan Arkin. But none of the actors had seemed right yet. So he sent me the script so I could read it over the weekend. I called him on Monday and said, "I think you sent me the wrong script." And he asked why. "This character's black." And he said, "Yeah, but he's white for the first five minutes." And I said, "Well, why don't you get a black guy to play a white character in whiteface instead of a white guy to play a black character in blackface? Is that possible?" And that's how that project came about.

AR: *I understand the original ending of Watermelon Man was quite a bit different in the screenplay. Could you tell me about that?*

MVP: Well, he goes to take another shit and he wakes up and he's white again. It was all a bad dream.

AR: *You've scored all of your films yourself. Did you have any formal training prior to that, or did you just kind of teach yourself the way you did filmmaking?*

MVP: I still don't have any training. If it ain't broke, don't fix it! I numbered all the keys on the piano, all 86, because the piano was missing two keys. And I just started pecking away the melody I heard inside my head. And even today, I go into the studio and the guy says, "Oh, you wrote that in D minor? Blah, blah, blah." And I just say, "What the fuck do I know about any of that? Just play it."

AR: *Let's talk about Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song, which you made yourself. What was the budget on that picture and how did you raise the money?*

MVP: I've never told anyone the budget. And the money was mine. I own everything, and I have no partners on that.

AR: *I remember reading that Bill Cosby had played some role in financing?*

MVP: Yes. He loaned me some money. Toward the end there, I needed some money. Bill stepped in and loaned me 50 grand, which I repaid to him rather than giving him a piece of the film.

AR: *Tell me about the distribution of Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song.*

MVP: Everybody turned it down, so forth and so on. Then a company called Cinemation came along. They were in chapter 11 and they took it. Only two theaters in the entire United States would show it. Not even two cities, but two *theaters*! [Laughs.] And it broke box office records at both theaters immediately. After that, of course, everybody called me. And the company was not set up to hide the money, so I got the money. They couldn't afford any carpets to hide the money under at the time.

AR: *Different people call you a lot of different things: a rebel, a pioneer. Spike Lee has dubbed you the Godfather of Black Cinema. How do you see yourself?*

MVP: I'm not really much of a navel-looker. I have this method I live by. I have the newspaper delivered to me in the morning. I look in the obituary column each morning. If I'm not in there, then I get my ass up.

AR: *You made a documentary about the history of black cinema, Classified X (1998). How did that come about?*

MVP: A French company asked me if I wanted to make an anthology film about blacks in Hollywood. I said, "No, I'm not interested in that. But I will tell you the story I want to tell. You want that, fine, I'll make that. But I make it my way and I make the decisions. I'm the boss or I'm not making it."

So I made sure I was the boss. I'm also the producer and the narrator, and I also own 50 percent of the print. So I got to be the boss and do it the way I wanted to do it. People say, "Why don't you try to get American money?" I say, "Bullshit. I don't want American money. I'd rather be the boss and make what I want to make, the way I want to make it."

AR: *Your son, Mario Van Peebles, directed the feature Baadasssss about you. You've also been the focus of numerous books and documentaries. That must be quite surreal.*

MVP: When I first saw my son Mario's film, I said, "It's Seabiscuit on two legs." [Laughs.] I've become Seabiscuit!

AR: *You've become quite a cult figure.*

MVP: You know, I don't think it could happen to a nicer guy! [Laughs again.] People say, "You're so brave" or "You're so tough." I'm not. I'm not anything. It was like that movie *Network* (1976); I just wasn't going to take it anymore. People say, "How are you doing this?" or "It must be so difficult." Nope. It's not difficult at all. I just do it.